

Chapter 19

Theory and Practice

South African radicals gained a rare understanding of the interactions between labour and nationalist movements in a colonial type society. Those who served an apprenticeship in trade unions had no illusions about the colour prejudices of white workers. Communists were as familiar with the shortcomings of Coloured and African left-wing groups. Multi-racial from top to bottom, the party claimed to form a bridge between the two streams and aspired to unite them in a great revolutionary flood.

Communist theory and strategy were most effective when adjusted to local conditions and the existing level of political maturity. The party had to set the pace and yet not move so fast as to become isolated. It might then turn into a doctrinaire sect like the early socialists, or run the risk of being destroyed. A fine judgement of political possibilities was needed, and this the party had acquired, sometimes at the expense of internal strain. Though they might seem to move slowly and with too much caution, the Communists were by far the most revolutionary group in the country.

Critics in the international communist movement complained that the party was not revolutionary enough. It was accused of 'tailism'; of 'lagging behind the growing mass discontent'; of being 'practically isolated from the spontaneous movement of the masses'; of 'committing serious mistakes of a Right opportunist character'. The indictment appeared in a ten-page memorandum from the ECCI, the executive committee of the Communist International. 1 Though dated 7 May 1930, it was made public only in December, when a first instalment appeared in *Umsebenzi*.

As in 1928, and in keeping with Lenin's thesis of 1920 on the national movement in colonies, the ECCI proposed two stages in South Africa's revolution. The first phase would terminate in a capitalist democracy, the second in socialism. Lenin's thesis assigned a primary role to a revolutionary nationalist bourgeoisie in the first phase. The ECCI, in contrast, asserted that in South Africa the 'native bourgeoisie exists only in an embryonic form. The intellectuals (native teachers, native parsons) are mostly in the service of the European ruling class. 'Therefore, concluded the ECCI,

'the only class capable of uniting the national revolutionary fighting front is the native proletariat, supported by the most exploited masses of the white proletariat'.

Communists were the vanguard of the working class. They should maintain their independence in all circumstances, for only in that way could they accomplish their mission: 'the complete carrying through of the nationalist revolutionary struggle, and, as the subsequent stage, the socialist revolution'.

A programme of action for the 'independent native republic' in its first phase should include demands for civic rights and the removal of discriminatory measures - pass and poll tax laws, restrictions on freedom of movement and residence, labour compounds and indentured labour - together with a return of land to the peasants and a united front between Africans and poor whites. All this was familiar. It had formed the political stock in trade for many years of the Communist party, the ANC, the ICU and, more recently, the League of African Rights. Since all agreed, would it not be sensible of them to combine their forces in a concerted effort behind the programme?

Definitely not, said the ECCI. The League, the ICU and the ANC were reformist organizations or 'petty bourgeois nationalist parties' which used radical slogans to entice the masses. By associating with 'reformists' like Gumede or 'low traitors' like ModiaKgotsa, the party made itself responsible for their waverings, abandoned its independent role, and allowed the League's programme to eclipse its own. For instance, the party had urged Africans to 'keep cool, keep your heads' during the Durban raids; and collected signatures on a petition to the 'slave-owning imperialist parliament. These were reformist methods of struggle. The party should have organized demonstrations of protest among Africans and whites, committees of action and strikes in factories. Only in this way could it 'guarantee the hegemony of the proletariat in the nationalist revolutionary movement'.

There was no reason to suppose that white workers and Africans would come out on strike or act in unison for a political aim. The ECCI exaggerated the strength of the party's resources and at the same time underestimated the value of its ideological contribution. It was correct of communists to work with and within the ANC, to criticize backward leaders like Seme and ModiaKgotsa, to praise Gumede for his spirited defence of the party and the Soviet Union, and to adopt methods of struggle appropriate to the general level of political consciousness and organization. If there was to be no united action, not even with leaders of Gumede's calibre and not for a programme of immediate demands, why should the party aim at an 'independent native republic, instead of an out-and-out socialist revolution?

This was the central issue. Instead of facing it squarely, the ECCI complained that the party failed to understand its own policy. African members, 'still influenced by petty-bourgeois peasant nationalism, insisted on a purely 'nationalist-revolutionary movement' and ignored 'the necessity for the dictatorship of the proletariat in the social revolution'. White communists, in contrast, retained remnants of racial chauvinism, denied the role of African nationalism, believed only in a 'purely proletarian struggle', and therefore neglected to put the party at the head of the growing nationalist revolution. Bunting, in particular, wanted to 'skip the bourgeois democratic stage' and proceed directly to the 'pure' proletarian revolution.

The criticisms of Bunting were supported by extracts - distorted or quoted out of context, he complained - from his letter of October 1929 to the British party. He, together with Andrews and Roux, was said to be a chauvinist because he had no confidence in the African's capacity for struggle; a reformist, because he would limit the national movement to a struggle for equal rights; and a right deviator because he allowed 'the native bourgeoisie and the intellectuals' to take the lead. These errors amounted to 'a tacit acceptance of European domination'.

Reduced to simple terms, the ECCI's complaint was that African communists were nationalists at heart and that white communists belittled the national liberation movement. The supposed dichotomy rested on a misunderstanding of the party's structure and role. For the former, the party had a uniform body of principles and should have been judged as a single entity. African party members like Nzula, Mofutsanyana and Nkosi repeatedly advocated a class struggle and criticized the ANC's conservative leaders. Bunting, Roux, Baker and Malkinson, on the other hand, accepted the black republic policy, worked closely with militant African nationalists, and consistently agitated for the removal of colour bars. As regards the role, the party could not take over the ANC's function of developing a sense of national pride and unity. The party and the ANC were allies rather than rivals in a struggle against class exploitation and racial discrimination.

Congress represented a variety of interests and trends. It was hampered internally by tribal and regional rivalries; confused by external and contrary pressures from government agencies, white liberals and radicals. Conservatives competed with militants for leadership. Unable to make any impression on a hard, implacable regime, the parsons and intellectuals who dominated Congress allowed it to drift into apathy and despair. D. S. Letanka, editor of *Abantu Batho* since 1912, reproached the leaders for thinking more of presidential 'honours, than of the welfare of their race. They had forfeited the confidence and loyalty of the people, he warned, by quarrelling among themselves. Africans no longer believed that Congress would put an end to tribalism and lead them against the white oppressors.²

The weaknesses reflected a general state of political immaturity which the ECCI ignored. The authors of the memorandum thought it quite evident that the opposition to Hertzog's bills was 'transforming itself into a struggle against the entire system of imperialist oppression. To equip itself for the leadership, the party was advised to employ a core of full-time professional revolutionaries, form cells in factories and streets, organize revolutionary trade unions of workers and farm labourers, and launch a peasants' movement for the seizure of land. The party should also extend its activities to Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland, establish close contact with the revolutionary toiling masses of Rhodesia, Kenya and Portuguese Africa, and become the ideological leader of communists in other parts of the continent. The party should aim at forming 'independent native workers' and peasants' republics as a transitory stage towards the subsequent Union of Socialist Soviet Republics of Africa'. It was an ambitious programme, and so far to the left that any communist who did not accept all of it ran the risk of being called a 'right deviationist'.

The party had earlier and without external prompting attempted to put its house in order for the sharp struggles that lay ahead. 'We have not yet built up a really centralized and disciplined organization,' reported the executive bureau. It decided to register only active members who paid their dues regularly, and to purge the ranks of those who were inactive or politically unreliable.³

One of the first to be expelled for unreliability was Manuel Lopes of Cape Town, a radical socialist of fourteen years' standing and a die-hard opponent of the black republic. It was, he maintained, Marcus Garvey's gospel of rabid Negro nationalism writ large in the constitution of the CP, and 'an opportunist distortion'. Any nationalist movement could only arrest the revolutionary class movement. To this Roux as editor replied that any white socialist who refused to acknowledge the right of the exploited and sjambokked Africans to complete national autonomy was a chauvinist. Nothing in the slogan of a 'native republic' should antagonize any genuine white revolutionary. ⁴

Stern measures were to follow. Wolton returned to South Africa in November 1930 at the request of the Comintern and with two resolutions from the ECCI. He and his wife had gone with a British delegation in July to the fifth congress of the RILU in Moscow. They reported on South Africa and helped to draft the directives. ⁵ Molly Wolton remained to attend the Lenin school while Douglas proceeded on his mission to South Africa. He took over the position of acting secretary from Bunting and persuaded Roux, who was impressed by his determination and apparent command of theory, to transfer the paper to Johannesburg.

The resolutions were circulated in December in preparation for the ninth annual conference.⁶ They warned of a serious right-wing danger which caused sharp political disagreements, organizational chaos and 'intensely bitter, non-political and personal divisions in the leadership'. The right wing, according to the executive bureau, was fundamentally opposed to the policy adopted at the annual conference in 1928. In particular, the opposition had no confidence in the revolutionary capacity of the masses, failed to lead them in struggle, and for chauvinistic reasons prevented Africans from taking a full part in the leadership.

The indictment was repeated in a variety of forms throughout the year. Wolton, claiming the authority of a 'CI representative', installed himself firmly at the head. A new central committee 'was carefully elected to exclude the politically dangerous elements, notably Bunting and Malkinson. It consisted of nineteen Africans and four whites: Wolton, the general secretary, Roux, Sachs and Baker. For the first time, claimed Wolton, 'the conference was able to make a general analysis of the situation and tasks of the Party in this country in terms of Lemmst theory. The ninth congress, he claimed, 'marks a decisive turning point in the class struggle, away from the dangers of white chauvinism and opportunism, into the path of revolutionary struggle along the new line of independent leadership in the national revolution towards the dictatorship of the proletariat. 7

Wolton made an effort to reshape the party on the model adopted in advanced industrial countries. Branches were instructed to let inactive members lapse and to place the active ones in functional groups attached to factories, mines, labour compounds and townships. By concentrating its forces, the party would establish itself firmly in strategic areas. The scheme was a great improvement on the existing organization, in which members came together for propaganda purposes and rarely engaged in systematic, continuous political activity. But the branches had few members in factories or workshops and none on the mines, in spite of attempts made since July 1930 to form an African miners' union. The spade work yielded long-term results rather than immediate gains.

African trade unionism had declined on the Rand since the withdrawal of Thibedi and Weinbren from the FNETU. It was now revived under a new name - the African Federation of Trade Unions - and in the form of a broad militant movement. Instead of fighting for higher wages in specific occupations, it organized or took part in demonstrations of the unemployed, international labour day rallies, and pass burning campaigns. Wolton argued that no union worth its salt would restrict its activities to the economic struggle. The proper role of African unions was to take the struggle to a 'higher political level' and guarantee the supremacy of the working class in the national movement.

The argument was sound in the circumstances. A strong infusion of workers into the ANC's councils might have fired them with a sense of urgency and a militant spirit. Wolton, who had no practical experience of trade unions, forgot, however, that their primary function was to improve wages and conditions. A union that had passed this test might gain rather than lose by engaging in politics. As Kadalie had learned, on the other hand, no union would retain the confidence of its members if it neglected their economic interests. Wolton's policy therefore neither produced trade unions nor strengthened the influence of the workers on the liberation front.

Wolton's main concern was to install the party as the commander-in-chief of the liberation forces. It should, he urged, steer clear of 'leaders who have repeatedly betrayed the struggle'. There must be a united front from below and with the rank-and-file. His approach turned out to be much the same as the old policy of appealing to the masses. Instead of a League of African Rights, the party instituted Ikaka Labasebenzi - the Workers' Shield - in January 1931. Affiliated to the International Red Aid, its function was to assist political prisoners, organize mass campaigns against all forms of White Terror, and 'fight against all forms of Racial oppression and Racial Chauvinism'.⁸ Meetings were held, collections were taken, and some relief was given; but, wrote Wolton, 'the organization failed to stimulate any widespread support amongst the Bantu'.⁹

Workers and peasants, according to Wolton's thesis, were ripe for revolution. Only the influence of timid, reformist leaders restrained them. They would respond, he believed, to the party's call for a general strike, civil disobedience and any possible kind of resistance to governmental authority. Radical socialists before him - Crawford, Dunbar, Andrews, Bunting and Jones - had also followed the 'hard line'. They had appealed to a militant white proletariat, as he to the African working class, with equally disappointing results.

He did succeed in arousing a feeling of urgency. New forms of propaganda were adopted. Roux and Gomas pelted members of parliament with leaflets from the gallery of the House on 6 March, the 'international day of struggle against unemployment'. An unprecedented multi-racial demonstration on May Day in Johannesburg brought 2,000 Africans and 1,000 whites on to the streets. Advancing from different points the two columns converged and shouting 'We want bread,' 'Work or Wages,' swept down on the Carlton Hotel. Police fastened the doors and beat off the attack. The demonstrators moved on to the Rand Club, where they clashed with the police in hand-to-hand fights. Four whites and two Africans were arrested. Issy Diamond, a revolutionary barber and leader of unemployed whites, was sentenced to twelve months, hard labour, the longest sentence yet imposed on a white communist.

The unusual display of inter-racial solidarity confirmed Wolton's belief that he had found the key to revolution. So slight a gain as the temporary coming together of four white unions with the APTU reflected, he thought, 'the rapid radicalization of the workers. Drawn together in common struggle, workers of all races would lead the peasants 'in the national revolution for a Native Republic towards a Workers' and Peasants' Government in defence of the Soviet Union'. 11 Similar optimistic forecasts recurred in a stream of manifestos, directives and appeals from the party, the AFTU, Ikaka Labasebenzi, and the Unemployed Workers, Union.

No amount of slogan shouting would stop the government's offensive. New curfew regulations required African women to carry night passes between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m. on the Rand and in other selected areas. Africans were being reduced to the level of a conquered people held down by an occupying army. The party appealed for country-wide strikes on 1 August against the 'vicious intensification of persecution'; but the people withheld their support. As A. Mopu, one of Durban's communists, explained after serving a five months' sentence for pass burning: 'I find the general idea of the Zulus in Durban is that it is no use joining the Party, as people are sent to jail.' He told them that unless they suffered, went to jail and died in struggle they would never be free. 'They said: "We must have arms. It is no use being killed without weapons." I am being deported!'12

The Durban demonstrators sweated out their sentences in prison road camps under warders who cursed and flogged on the slightest provocation. Communist prisoners were kept apart, short-rationed and thrashed when they complained. One died in jail of bronchial pneumonia after having been sjambokked and left for three days without medical care. Wolton exposed the conditions in Umsebenzi and was put on trial for lese-majeste. His witnesses testified to having been flogged themselves, or to having seen others flogged, and he was sentenced to four months imprisonment for defaming the warder in charge.

How many men would run the risk of being beaten, half-starved and locked up in stinking cells? Would the party lose its followers by calling for sacrifices greater than they were prepared to make? The leaders took an optimistic view of the revolutionary potential and blamed setbacks on organizational defects or the slackness and heresies of members. There was a great improvement in political clarity, reported Solly Sachs at a central committee meeting in July, though the party still lagged behind the masses. It had made no headway in the basic industries of mining and agriculture; and the AFTU was not yet able to build a broad basis round the existing unions. Taking his cue from the eleventh plenum of the Communist International, Wolton attributed the party's weakness to the 'right danger which consists of opportunism, white chauvinism and passivity.13 These were ominous words that heralded a major purge.

The axe had fallen in March on Sam Malkinson, the devoted and courageous party leader in Bloemfontein, one of Afrikanerdom's main strongholds. He had turned the township into a 'storm centre' of the liberation movement and attracted hundreds of recruits, including prominent members of the ICU. Pirow had acknowledged his influence by banning him from public gatherings. Wolton, however, deciding that he was a 'Buntingite', dropped him from the central committee, much to the annoyance of the Bloemfontein branch. Roux, then faithfully carrying out the line, explained that Malkinson was theoretically unsound. The branch continued to protest, whereupon the political bureau expelled him 'for factional activities'.¹⁴ The party in Bloemfontein never fully recovered from this self-inflicted blow.

Disciplinary action was next mooted against Andrews for having appeared on the platform of the Johannesburg United May Day Committee in opposition to the party's non-racial demonstration. At the request of the political bureau, he submitted a memorandum on his work as secretary of the Trades and Labour Council. The party, he pointed out, expected its members to seek office in trade unions with a view to promoting its revolutionary programme. This being so, his position as secretary was not inconsistent with the party's principles. He had done what he could 'to present a barrier against reactionary tendencies and racial antagonisms and to encourage and assist the militant elements. Against much opposition the TLC had adopted a constitution without a colour bar and accepted the affiliation of unions which included Coloured, Indian and African members. If it was not proper for a communist to be an official of the council, he must necessarily object to his own union affiliating to such a body. It would then fall into the hands of conservative leaders who rejected the party's entire policy.'¹⁵

Andrews argued in effect that a communist was bound by the rules of trade union democracy. It was his duty to put forward a progressive, militant policy. He should neither be censured nor resign his office if the rank-and-file refused to follow him. The political bureau emphatically rejected these news. It issued a statement of 1,500 words in September 1931, around the expulsion of Andrews, Tyler, Sachs, Bunting, Fanny Klenerman (Mrs Glass) and Weinbren. Apart from Bunting, all were prominent trade unionists. They were accused of having drifted away from the party into reformism and social democratic methods of work; of building 'a strong reactionary trade union apparatus, in full support of the class collaboration policy of the reformist Unions'; and of neglecting 'the red trade unions'. Bunting's case was different. He had erred by appealing for leniency when defending political prisoners in court; had attempted to secure Thibedi's reinstatement in the party; and had spoken on the same platform as members of the ICU and ANC at the Bantu Club.¹⁶

The specific charges were trivial or related to methods of work rather than disputes over policy. Inactive members could have been left to lapse without a fuss, as was the usual procedure. Wolton wanted to uncover a 'right wing danger' for reasons that appeared in the preamble. It predicted a 'new wave of struggles' against the 'Fascisation of the whole Bourgeois State apparatus'; deplored the failure of Communist parties everywhere to lead the masses; and alleged that the failure was giving rise to 'strong right wing tendencies within the parties of all countries'. So also in the South African party. Its 'right-wing elements' revealed themselves 'in unprincipled opportunistic acceptance of the line of the party in words, whilst rejecting it in deeds', in sabotage, passivity and in 'definite factional activities against the leadership'.

Wolton might have believed that only drastic surgery would preserve international communism; and that South Africa should set an example. Sachs, who was then a member of the political bureau, complained that it had never even met to discuss the expulsions. The resolution, he said, 'emanates from two individuals who are in charge of the Press, and not from any responsible party organ or committee!' 17 According to Roux, the expulsions were ordered by Wolton and Lazar Bach, a young communist from Latvia, who came to South Africa in 1929, joined the party in 1931, and was promoted to the political bureau within a few months. He, too, was a doctrinaire and insisted on a 'hard line' because it seemed to be consistent with the CIs current policy.

The expelled members were not accused of being chauvinists or of opposing the black republic policy. As the daily press quickly noted, they had offended by not being 'red' enough. Pirow said they were dangerous revolutionaries, whereas Wolton and Bach took their standard from industrialized countries with a racially homogeneous population and a large, established working class. Like Kadalie, when he expelled communists from the ICU and imported a constitution from Britain, Wolton allowed himself to be guided by external influences with insufficient regard for local conditions. He insisted that the party should 'go it alone, without compromising entanglements or commitments to less radical organizations. His fervent faith in the revolutionary mood of African workers and peasants convinced most party members that his drastic measures were justified.

Durban's district party committee approved. The committee in Cape Town went one better by expelling its own 'right-wing elements: J. Pick, Mr and Mrs Plax, Wilfrid Harrison, J. Raynard and S. Fridman. La Guma was the next to go, although he had been reinstated to full membership only three months previously, on confessing his error in having opposed Wolton during the parliamentary election of 1929. The notice of expulsion, which was signed by his close associate John Gomas, alleged that he failed 'to control revolutionary work in the Red Trade Unions' and

that he questioned the party's capacity to provide independent leadership in the trade union movement. He was, in effect, a victim of the 'go it alone' policy.¹⁸

La Guma and Gomas were then actively engaged in forming trade unions on a joint income of £4 10s. a month. Both assisted a group of garment workers who came out on strike against a wage cut of 10s. on a weekly wage of £3 10s. or less. Bob Stuart, secretary of the local union, declared that the strike was unofficial, whereupon La Guma appealed for financial help to the garment workers union in Johannesburg. Bach intervened, with the result that the party in Johannesburg instructed La Guma to 'pursue an independent line, and refuse aid from any 'non-party' union. He ignored the directive, and filed a counter-complaint against Bach who, he said, was 'tactless, bureaucratic and disruptive', the 'cause of past friction and potential disruption', and 'a serious menace to the Party welfare, prestige and progress'.¹⁹ Bach remained, while La Guma, the chief architect of the 'black republic' policy, was cast out into the political wilderness. There he remained until 1935, when he launched the National Liberation League under the slogan: 'For Equality, Land and Freedom.'

Most of those expelled withdrew from politics or became absorbed in trade union work. Andrews declared that he would continue to organize workers of all races and creeds for the dictatorship of the proletariat, resigned from the TLC in 1932 and went to England for a serious operation. Bunting alone fought hard for reinstatement. He did not hanker after the leadership, he explained in a circular letter to members.²⁰ All he wanted was to do his bit in the great war for African emancipation' and free himself from the persistent misrepresentation, boycott and persecution' to which he had been subjected for over a year. Because of the propaganda against him, much real party work had been scamped or most inefficiently conducted,; while 'party membership and general agitational activity have shrivelled almost to a skeleton'. He had been banned by a small dictatorship without giving any notice (much less a hearing). Members, he appealed, should insist on a conference where delegates could debate the issues and cancel the expulsion.

No such conference was held. The harder Bunting tried to get a hearing, the more he was attacked by the political bureau, until 'Buntingism' became as notorious a label as Trotskyism, in party circles. Roux has given a detailed account of the unworthy methods used to discredit his old friend and former leader, and to hound him from public life.²¹ The story makes painful reading, the more so because Roux, who also sat on the bureau, actively participated in the persecution, even to the extent of informing against him on the merest hint of suspicion that he had joined with Thibedi in setting up an opposition Communist League, allegedly under Trotskyist influences. Bunting was a wolf in sheep's clothing, wrote J. B. Marks on

this occasion; a man who had been expelled because of chauvinism, anti-native and anti-party activities. To this Umsebenzi, then still edited by Roux, added that Bunting was a rich lawyer, and absentee landlord, and prominent son of a British peer who had fought firmly for imperialist domination.²²

Roux objected to the abuse, and was consequently dropped from the political bureau, leaving it in the hands of Bach, Wolton and his wife Molly, who returned from the Lenin school in 1931. It was not until September 1935, during another round of expulsions, that Roux made his first public act of contrition and apologized for his share in the fratricidal feud. Eight years later, in his biography of Bunting, he gave reasons for his acquiescence: he agreed in the main with the Comintern's policy, did not completely share Bunting's outlook, and knew that he himself would be expelled if he protested. These are honest reasons, yet they do not justify Roux's attempt to shuffle off the ultimate responsibility on to Soviet Russia and the Comintern. ²³ No amount of pressure from these quarters, and no Comintern representative in South Africa, could have forced the leaders to expel any members against their will. Roux, Bach and the Woltons acted freely, believing that what they did was in the interests of the movement.

Wolton has not explained his own attitude, although he wrote a book on South Africa which appeared in 1947, fourteen years after he had left the country. The book is negatively revealing. His description of the Communist party, its work and policies, takes up fifty lines. He makes no mention of his role in the party or of his wife's; indeed, never tells the reader that they lived in South Africa. ²⁴ He is warm in his praise of Albert Nzula, but does not record that he was a party leader, or that he died in Moscow of pneumonia in 1933. Similarly, when referring to Kotane, Mofutsanyana, Marks and Nkosi, he describes them as trade unionists and never as party members. No word is said about the expulsions in his book.

Yet he had the backing of the ECCI, which approved the expulsions in a letter read by J. P. Sepeng, a stalwart from the Potchefstroom branch, to the central committee in December 1931. ²⁵ The 'Right opportunist chauvinist Bunting clique', according to the ECCI, having opposed the 'whole line of the Comintern, had 'openly become chauvinist agents of Imperialism, appealing to Pirow and Hertzog against the party'. The accusation, which no one in South Africa could possibly credit, was as groundless as the ECCI's assumption of an imminent revolutionary upsurge. 'The framework of the slave regime is beginning to burst under the pressure of the masses, who are seeking in the CP their guide and leader.

The communists simply did not have the resources needed to carry out the ambitious programme suggested by the ECCI. It reproached them for failing to organize a peasants, revolt, strikes, and illegal cells in factories, mines, farms and

reserves; for not having taken over the leadership of the national liberation movement; for defects of organization, which lagged far behind their political influence. The weaknesses were an index of the people's political backwardness and could not be cured by purely internal party reforms. It might be correct to argue that every struggle for elementary rights and pressing needs 'must inevitably become a revolutionary struggle'. The ECCI, however, studiously ignored the state's monopoly of armed force, the inability to discover effective forms of resistance against a merciless repression, and the decline of militancy in mass organizations.

Sol Plaatje told the Cape Native Voters Association at Aliwal North that 1931 had been a barren year for the ANC, and Selope Thema agreed. ' Since 1912 and during my nineteen years of service in the cause of Bantu freedom, I have never witnessed such inactivity and apathy on the part of our leaders as now. He would not have them make a revolutionary demonstration on the lines of the Communist party, but the least they should do was to make the whites realize that Africans also formed part of the country's national life. The leaders, he complained, had no patriotism or pride of race. Divided by petty jealousies, they refused to sacrifice personal ambition for the greater ambition of their people.²⁶

Communists traced the ANC's futility to its policy of avoiding mass struggle. The decision to conduct an anti-pass campaign in 1934 meant only 'this year, next year, sometime, never'. The party called for resistance to the Native Service Contract Act of 1932. It was an abominable measure that legalized the whipping of African lads under eighteen for offences against the master and servant laws, authorized African guardians to bind minor children to labour, and aimed at turning share croppers into labour tenants, working from ninety to 180 days a year for the farmer on the days of his choice. Churches protested, whereas the ANC's special conference in January 1933 merely objected to not having been consulted. Seme told Congress in the following April to pray that Hertzog would lay the foundations of a great temple of justice, peace and goodwill for all people'. The conference ended in disorder as delegates accused Seme of autocracy and unconstitutional behaviour. ²⁷ How, asked the communists, could a president ' who licks the boots of this bloody imperialist robber so shamelessly', lead his people against oppression?²⁸

Rejected by the ANC and rejecting it in turn, the communists went their way alone, purged, so they claimed, of all reformist dross. Instead of a white chauvinist Party of white shopkeepers, lawyers and petty bourgeois intellectuals, as under Bunting's regime,' wrote Eugene Dennis in 1932, 'we have become a Party of Native, Coloured and white proletarians, direct from the enterprises, from the points of exploitation and struggle, from the mines, docks, farms, reserves.' ²⁹ Dennis (1904-61) was a lumberjack from Seattle, U.S.A. and the grandson of an Irish rebel who went to America with a British price on his head. He became the general secretary of the

American party in 1948 and its chairman in 1959, after serving nearly five years in Atlanta penitentiary for contravening the Smith Act. 30 He represented the Comintern in South Africa for about twelve months in 1932-3 and concentrated on building the party by means of systematic, continuous activities round small local demands.

There were many shortcomings, he acknowledged, especially in the field of united front activity on a practical and concrete' programme; yet for the first time in its history, the party was finding a firm footing in basic industries and rural areas. Its membership had increased eightfold; recruits and cadres were being trained in party school; it had set up many cells in factories, mines and docks; a miners' union was taking shape; and a union of seamen and harbour workers flourished at Durban and Cape Town.

More progress might have been made along these lines but for the depression and the expulsion of competent trade unionists from the party. The extent of the depression was never properly gauged. Industrial census returns for 1930 and 1931 were not published, and the government employment exchanges catered only for whites in the big towns, and for Coloured at Cape Town and Kimberley. The number of registered work-seekers rose from 81,000 in 1930 to 188,000 in 1933, and the number who found jobs through the exchanges from 18,000 to 45,000. Last to be hired, first to be fired, Africans suffered most, and the exchanges were closed to them. Those without work were pushed back into the reserves, where unemployment was endemic, yet 14,000 Africans were estimated to be looking for jobs in Johannesburg alone at the beginning of 1932.³¹

The number of Africans, Coloured and Indians working in factories fell by 18 per cent and in mines by 10 per cent in 1929-32. The volume of white employment in this period declined by 2 per cent and 17 per cent. Government, the opposition and labour leaders renewed pressure on state departments, railways, provincial administrations, municipal councils and private employers to absorb the 15,000 whites who were out of work at the lowest point in the depression. Fair wage clauses, protective tariffs, subsidized wages and every other conceivable administrative device were brought to bear.

In May 1930, on the day that parliament debated amendments to the Riotous Assemblies Act, Creswell told the House: 'My business is to use every effort to get European labour employed instead of native labour.' Patriotic and intelligent employers, he believed, would go to as much trouble and expense as the government to find work for their own flesh and blood. 32 Nine months later he claimed that the civilized labour policy had been instrumental in creating employment for 22,000 men on railways, roads and municipal projects. 33 In

November 1935 the number of 'civilized' labourers employed on subsidized schemes and relief works consisted of 21,760 whites and 1,957 Coloured.³⁴

'You are the co-rulers of the country,' Pirow told white workers at Germiston in July 1931. It was up to them to see that 'public opinion declared it to be a disgrace to employ a native where a white man could be employed'. He quoted figures to show that the nine largest municipalities between them employed 14,726 Africans, 2,619 Coloured, 1,846 Indians and only 961 white labourers, at wages ranging from 2s. a day for Africans to 11s. 3d. for whites in Johannesburg. ³⁵ A municipal conference held in September agreed that local councils should raise the proportion of their 'civilized' labourers to one-fifth of the unskilled labour force, provided that the government contributed half of the extra cost. A year later the railway board instructed departmental heads to retire African, Coloured and Indian employees over fifty-eight years of age; to retrench those over fifty whose health could be said to prejudice their efficiency, or who could be replaced by redundant whites; to dismiss any who refused to accept a wage cut; and generally to substitute whites where this could be done without extra cost. ³⁶

The old contention of radicals that white workers would be forced down to the African's economic level unless they raised him to their own seemed to be borne out by the conditions of relief workers. Living in tents without their families on 5s. a day and free rations, they were only slightly better off than the migrant peasant. The unskilled white had to learn that he was not above doing kaffir work', declared Afrikaner predikants at a government conference in July 1930. They would preach the virtues of thrift, self help and pride of race; urge the poor to live within their means; and stress the odium attaching to reliance for existence on the Church or State'. ³⁷ The Carnegie commission on poor whites produced five volumes with a diagnosis that attributed rural poverty to the stubborn refusal of poor whites to be servile or to work for the low wages paid to African farm labourers. About 400,000 whites, nearly one-fifth of the white population, lived in dire poverty'. The commission, however, disapproved strongly of direct material assistance without an equivalent service. It causes loss of independence and may imbue them with a sense of inferiority, impairs their industry, weakens their sense of personal responsibility, and helps to make them dishonest.'

Trade unionists said that sermons would not create jobs and clamoured for a system of state insurance. An unemployment commission, which included W. Freestone of the Cape Federation and C. B. Tyler of the TLC, left Africans out of its survey, declared that 'no real cure for unemployment' could be found, and recommended the setting up of a permanent fund. ³⁹ Capitalism was to blame, said the communists, and they damned the rulers for putting the burden of poverty and insecurity on Africans and Coloured. The party produced its own remedy in the

shape of a bill for a bold and imaginative insurance fund, to be financed by contributions from the state and employers, a levy on income tax payers, and money transferred from the defence and native affairs votes. All unemployed persons were to receive a basic benefit of not less than £1 a week, and to administer the fund through elected local committees.⁴⁰

Don't rely on parliament for bread and work, said the communists, as they called for mass action. Unemployed Afrikaners marched with Africans and Coloured for the first time in history, or sat with them on committees of an unemployed workers' union. The demonstrations were sporadic and confined to two or three big towns. Prejudice and inequality stood in the way. The whites were given work, while the police beat up African demonstrators and men who went from door to door in Johannesburg collecting food and money for a soup kitchen. Stephen Tefu, an AFTU organizer, was knocked unconscious and lost five teeth from a blow on the jaw where he intervened to protect the collectors, who were handcuffed and marched to the police station, and there beaten again in the presence of the sergeant in charge. Tefu and seventeen others were sentenced to seven weeks' hard labour for public violence and for holding an illegal procession.⁴¹

'Europeans out of work are called unemployed,' observed T. D. M. Skota's short-lived weekly, the African Leader, whereas 'Natives out of work are called loafers. ⁴² A dole for the white man; an endorsement out of town for the black. Racists exploited the difference in status. T. B. Rutherford of the printers' union, P. Mostert the editor of Forward, and Gideon Botha, one of the few Afrikaners in the old ISL, formed a Workers' and Farmers' Bond in 1931 to organize the unemployed for white supremacy, a minimum wage of 10s. for white Labourers, and the exclusion of Africans from prescribed occupations. ⁴³ Botha returned to the radical camp in 1933. His temporary defection was a sign of the pressure applied to the left wing in the labour movement.

African trade unionism suffered badly on the Rand, where the AFTU was left with only two unions at the beginning of 1932. To make matters worse, it was involved in a dispute with one of them, the African Clothing Workers, Union, because of its close association with the parallel white union under Solly Sachs. About 800 Africans had been locked out during a strike of white garment workers in Johannesburg. The Communist party accused Sachs of refusing to give the Africans strike pay and urged their able secretary, Gana Makabeni, to sever his connexion with the Garment Workers' Union. This he would not do, and was thereupon expelled from the party and the AFTU. He and Makue, his chairman, issued a summons against the AFTU for the return of the union's books and were denounced by the party as agents of Sachs, Bunting and the ruling class. ⁴⁴

The African Laundry Workers, Union also threatened to withdraw. Harmony was restored only after the AFTU had promised to make amends for its domineering tactics' and other shortcomings. These were symptoms of an ultra-leftism' that tended to alienate communists in many countries from less radical groups. The chief weakness of the movement, reported the ECCI at its twelfth plenum in 1932, was isolation. To overcome it, communist parties must abandon abstract and stereotyped' methods or work. In particular, empty phrases about revolutionary struggles should not be allowed to take the place of hard work for the satisfaction of immediate demands.

The AFTU was in danger of becoming a small sect, wrote Huiswood from Moscow in 1933. 45 Inexperience, want of initiative, and a top-heavy bureaucracy had brought it to the point of total collapse. He alleged that leaders called frivolously for strikes on any occasion, yet scarcely took part in the spontaneous strikes and revolts of Africans on the City Deep mine, the railways and docks at Durban and Port Elizabeth, or in the townships of Cradock and Middelburg. Moreover, the AFTU failed lamentably to draw African and white workers together in joint actions against employers and the reformist trade unionists. The bulk of the organized workers remained in the fold of the TLC and Cape Federation, whose racial policies and dependence on industrial conciliation procedures strengthened the labour aristocracy, facilitated the excessive exploitation of Africans, and isolated them from white workers. Huiswood's proposed remedy was to form a strong revolutionary opposition in existing unions rather than to organize competing unions.

Crawford, Andrews and other radical trade unionists had suggested an identical policy long before the adoption of the Industrial Conciliation Act. Its effects were patently divisive and mediatory, and therefore obnoxious to the left wing. There was no reason to suppose that whites, or even Coloured and Indians, would forgo their privileged status under the act for the sake of unity with low-paid Africans. The proper course of action in the circumstances was to concentrate on organizing African unions, conduct a vigorous campaign for equal access to all types of skilled work, and intensify pressures for the full recognition of all unions under the act. This approach, which the communists rejected as being reformist, might have done more to weaken racial barriers than a sterile agitation against industrial councils and conciliation boards.

Communist organizers were bound sooner or later to use the statutory procedures as the most expedient means of raising wages and improving working conditions. For this purpose they registered the unions of white, Coloured or Indian workers, and formed parallel, unregistered unions of Africans. W. Kalk succeeded in persuading white, Coloured and African leather workers to combine in a single

union in Johannesburg. 46 His spectacular break through the colour bar did not last, and the union eventually divided into racial groups. The pluralism had many disadvantages and often caused friction, as in the strikes of furniture and garment workers on the Rand; but no other practical solution was ever found. Its rejection by the Communist party in the early thirties, coming on top of the expulsions, probably delayed the growth of African trade unionism in the north. The party's militant policy and insistence on systematic work round specific demands had a more beneficial effect at Cape Town. Patient, pioneering efforts by Ray Alexander, Gomas, La Guma and J. Shuba among railway, harbour and factory workers produced a healthy crop of Coloured and African unions in later years.

In 1932 the communists stood alone on the peaks of revolutionary ardour, calling on the oppressed to follow them to freedom in a federation of independent African Republics. The course was plotted in a May Day manifesto. Overthrow British and Boer imperialism; confiscate the land, cattle and implements of landlords, companies and mission societies; divide the land among peasants and farm workers of all races; confiscate the mines, factories and all undertakings of the imperialist and capitalist robbers; forward to national independence under a workers' and peasants' government in a black republic. 47 This was a formula for the pure socialist society at one fell swoop such as Bunting had pleaded for at the sixth world congress of the CI in 1928. His expellers had expropriated his policy without regard to the great debate on the two-stage revolution.

Of immediate importance was the mounting offensive by Pirow's police against the party. Eddie Roux went to jail in February 1932 for two months' hard labour after defying an order banishing him from Durban. Defending himself, as was agreed would be done by all party members on trial, he told the court that though the order might be valid in law, it was not sanctioned by the people, who were unrepresented in parliament. There followed Wolton's sentence of four months' imprisonment for having exposed the brutal treatment of political prisoners. He refused to pay the fine and served his sentence. Peter Ramutla, a trade union organizer in Pretoria, was declared a vagrant' because he did not work for an employer, and went to a labour camp for twelve months. Stephen Tefu of Pretoria served two weeks for holding a public meeting. John Gomas received a sentence of three months for 'perjuring' himself by denying an allegation that he had hurled stones at scabs during a garment workers' strike. J. Mbete and E. Dhlamini of Pinetown, Durban, were sent to jail for six and three months because they distributed a party leaflet calling on people to demonstrate on Dingaan's Day and to refuse to pay their taxes. Mike Diamond was sentenced to six months, though the conviction was set aside on appeal, for duplicating the leaflet in his barber's shop.

Defiant and undeterred, the communists brought down more wrath on their heads by breaching the racial taboo in a parliamentary by-election at Germiston in

October 1932. The seat became vacant on the death of the sitting member, George Brown, a Glasgow born boiler-maker, who had held it for Labour since 1924. Four candidates, representing Labour, Nationalists, the SAP and Workers-Farmers Bond, contested the seat. Like all elections in the north, this was strictly for whites only, and the communists challenged the 'parliamentary farce' by putting J. B. Marks forward as their demonstrative candidate. A former teacher who had been dismissed from his post at Vredefort, OFS, for communist activities, Marks studied at the Lenin School in Moscow with Kotane and Mofutsanyana and returned to give all his time to the party.

The white candidates represented imperialist slavery, said Marks, who brought a message of struggle for full franchise rights, unemployment insurance and an end to colour bars, beer raids, poll tax and lodgers' permits. The permits were a great grievance. Apart from householders and their wives, no African over eighteen had a right to sleep in the township, not even in his parents' house, unless he held a permit from the superintendent on payment of 2s. a month. The police raided homes at any time of the night in search of unauthorized residents, who were liable to be fined, imprisoned and expelled from the location. Resist, said the communists, and many people did. Hundreds were arrested and some were charged with public violence.

The police struck back, broke up the communists' meetings; assaulted speakers; arrested Roux, Molly Wolton and Jeffrey Novene; and laid a charge of incitement to racial hostility. White hooligans took a hand and frogmarched Roux at the magistrate's court, where he had gone to propose Marks on nomination day. The campaign against the permits went on long after the election day until Turton, the location superintendent, led the police in an attack on a meeting. Shots were fired, a score of Africans were injured, and an elderly woman died of her wounds. An administrative court of inquiry into Turton's fitness for his office found in his favour, and brought to an end yet another skirmish in the endless battle against an insufferable bureaucracy. 48

The South African party candidate won the Germiston seat with a large majority. The tide was running fast against the government. Pirow carried out his threat to hamstring the communists who, he said, had gained a footing on the mines. There was a danger that the infection would be spread throughout the country by miners returning to their villages. 49 Ignoring protests from the entire labour movement, he issued orders early in November banning Roux, Wolton, Sachs, Kalk and Diamond for twelve months from the Rand. Wolton moved to Cape Town to assist in a tramwaymen's strike; the others remained and took the minister to court. The appellate division confirmed the orders in September 1933, by which time a new government had taken office. Smuts, as minister of justice, cancelled the bans.

Hitler was in power, war clouds were gathering over Europe, and the Communist International appealed for a united front against fascism and war. The South African communists, short period of isolation was drawing to a close.

Course: National Democratic Revolution

12034, Simons and Simons, Class and Colour, 1969, C19, Theory and Practice

8595 words